

In Jean's Space: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of an Academic Writing Group

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Abstract: Four faculty members across disciplines relay the story of an inspiring senior faculty mentor who organized an academic writing group for junior faculty members during the COVID-19 pandemic. This exceptional mentor, who facilitated the weekly academic writing group, provided a safe and supportive respite for junior faculty members navigating the tenure track during a difficult and frightening time in our history. The writing group, who bonded personally and professionally, provide not only our individual stories, but Jean's story, as she experienced personal hardships throughout this time. We hoped that others may find solace and inspiration in Jean's story and may experiment with a similar writing group.

Keywords: scholarship, collegiality, support, loss, writing group

“The magic of the community is in the shared act. Community members find each other, work together, support each other, and achieve success together. This is the joy of doing meaningful work together with like-minded people, with your friends.”

— THINK School of Creative Leadership

Introduction

This is the story of how a dynamic academician and friend, Jean, gathered a small group of junior faculty members together to write during the pandemic. It is also the story of the safe space that she created.

We surround Jean's story with our individual stories to illustrate the importance of a mentor and a friend, and to highlight the profound impact Jean had on our individual perspectives.

Our story is one of transition, collaboration, scholarship, success, and loss. It is a story of discovering community in a virtual space during the throes of the pandemic. Driven by the larger narrative of navigating the uncertainty that plagued not only our individual circumstances, but also this unique period in time, our collective account highlights how, amongst this turbulence, unexpected friendships, challenges, and opportunities emerged.

The Invitation

In late spring of 2020, during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, Jean sent out an email invitation to junior faculty members to join a virtual academic writing group.

Hi all,

I was in the discussion on mentoring junior faculty and my imagination started running! I thought it would be fun and productive to have a virtual writing group this summer.

In order to organize such a thing, I wanted to know if there was interest and, if so, what/when/how...etc.

Let me know what you think and we can see where this goes!

Cheers,
Jean

In our school, there were frequent conversations about the need for greater support for new tenure track faculty, and Jean took the initiative to put the idea into action. Jean had prior experience with faculty writing groups. In her draft of a narrative inquiry, she wrote:

Prior to my own promotion to associate professor and being granted tenure, I joined a group of faculty members from across the school to support each other in our writing. We would meet for a day (usually a Friday or Saturday), share our writing, give feedback using discussion protocols, and spend time at our laptops writing with the presence of others in the same space doing the same thing. I found this structure to be very helpful in keeping me focused, on track, and enlivening my writing.

Each of us accepted Jean's invitation. We entered with different motives and life circumstances, yet we shared our wish to connect with our colleagues during an otherwise isolating time in pandemic life. And connect we did, even despite the departure of two members early on. Over the next year, we four would come to know Jean—and one another—more personally. We would share our scholarly signatures, our work as professors, challenges we each faced navigating the pandemic, glimpses into our work-from-home settings in different states, and insights into our personal lives. In the following section, each author of this piece will share a little bit about our lives, our work-from-home contexts, and our memories of Jean.

Emily's Story

I was in my second year as an assistant professor and led an online graduate program at the university when I entered our writing group. I was in my early 50s, married, and had enjoyed a 28-year career in education. My scholarship focus was mindfulness in education, a research agenda born of personal passion. I always believed in transformative learning and educational settings that focus on well-being and whole person development.

I had struggled in my first year to carve out time for scholarship with multiple teaching, advising, and administrative tasks, and joined the writing group in my second year hoping to make scholarship a weekly practice. This group also appealed as an opportunity to connect. I was already working remotely from the southwest when the pandemic arrived in March of

2020. Initially, I was working from a small apartment as my husband and I searched for more permanent housing. The first scholarship group meeting noted in my calendar was June 3, 2020. Juggling my husband's health challenge, a tenure track position, and living "between homes" during a pandemic was incredibly challenging. Although I did not feel like I had time to add one more commitment to my schedule, this felt important.

The initial meetings confirmed my decision to join the writing group. It was nice to connect with other faculty in a more intimate setting and begin to develop a relationship with a mentor. It became a ritual to make tea before each meeting, and my rescue pup often rested at my feet. I looked forward to connecting on Fridays at the end of a largely independent work week.

Later in the year, my husband and I moved into a home with my own home office and I loved being surrounded by a lovely view out the window, my books, plants, personal mementos, and a reading chair. I felt more relaxed with the group. We regularly talked about life and teaching in addition to our scholarship agendas. It felt safe to ask a question, share honestly, and admit when I felt tired.

My first memories of Jean were from school-wide faculty meetings during the 2018–2019 academic year. Jean often sat in the back row, sometimes knitting, carefully following conversation. She had very short hair and sometimes wore a hat. I wondered if it was purely a style choice or if she might be going through cancer treatment. Sometimes she wore brightly colored clothing—she had her own sense of style. I like that about people. She didn't speak frequently, yet when she spoke it was with an experienced, thoughtful comment or question about a particular issue. My first impressions were that she was an engaged senior faculty member, a no-nonsense person who was friendly and focused. My understanding of who Jean was as a person and mentor deepened during our pandemic writing year together.

Nicole's Story

I've never found writing groups or retreats very productive, and as a composition instructor, I often feel guilty for admitting that. One, they require me to place myself in an environment that I know I don't work well in. Two, they feel like an obligation or maybe just inorganic. But it was August 2020, the middle of a pandemic, and I had just relocated to New England from Georgia, eager to start my new position as an Assistant Professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture. As a 32-year-old lesbian woman who had spent the last seven years collaborating with a tight-knit group of scholars and minoritized youth in the southeastern US, that eagerness quickly turned to nervousness when I realized some of the new relationships I thought I would begin to build in local schools and community centers wouldn't be possible as a result of COVID-19 protections. So, when I received an email to participate in a junior faculty writing group, I promised myself that I would connect with my new colleagues even though I would have preferred to say "no."

That year, I worked from the townhouse I had moved into just a few months prior. I did not know why, but it had yet to grow on me. The structure was too new to have felt lived in, so I spent an obnoxious amount of time rearranging and decorating my office space to make it as

cozy and comfortable as possible. At times, my colleagues would catch a glimpse of my dogs, who shared this space with me. Before each writing group session, I would heat a cup of chamomile tea, leaving myself just enough time to walk up the stairs and settle into my seat before signing in. The dogs, being part of the fabric of my process, would follow me from kitchen to desk to couch where the three of us would look out the window until 1:00 p.m. on the dot.

My first memories of Jean were on Zoom. In fact, I only ever interacted with Jean on Zoom. As it was my first year at University of Southern Maine and all of our work was being carried out remotely, I found it more difficult to learn who my new colleagues were. Jean caught my attention, however, as the woman sitting in a rocking chair knitting during our school-wide meeting. At the time, I had wondered if she knit during face-to-face meetings too. I thought it was kind of badass and, quite frankly, didn't know what to make of it. Looking back and having come to understand the kind and compassionate leader Jean was, it seems in knitting, Jean was modeling a different way of being attentive and showing us, or at least me, that the academy has space for the calm—unrushed yet still deeply engaged.

Larissa's Story

I am a 40-something Afro-Boricua woman who identifies as Black. A large part of my identity is my family, as a wife of 25 years and mother to three children. The connection to my family is relevant to my career in academia because my scholarship focuses on race, racism, and education, and I often draw from the well of my family's experience in navigating schooling.

This was my first position at a regional comprehensive public university, but I previously held a tenure-track position at another institution. As such, I was awarded three years served, which means that the tenure-track was fast ticking for me! I know I needed to hit the ground running with my writing and research. Beginning a new position is always hard, but beginning it in a different state and time zone is even harder. While I would have joined the writing group regardless, the delay in my arrival to the university made the invitation even more attractive because it was a chance to not only join a group that supported my scholarship goal, but also it was a way to connect with my new peers. I appreciated that it wasn't a required space like a department or committee meeting. Rather, each of us voluntarily came together with a mutual desire to improve our scholarship. This shared purpose truly laid the groundwork for an environment ripe for relationship building, honest feedback, and meaningful connection.

My living space, including my work space, was quite busy during the pandemic. I lived in an apartment in the Midwest with my husband and my high school-aged daughter, but due to the pandemic, my other two college-aged daughters were home too. We had more people than rooms, so at the beginning of each day the five of us would gather to coordinate schedules and see which of us had Zoom meetings/class and when. My desk was the large living room table, which I shared with my husband. I consistently used the same workspace most of the day while others swapped quiet spaces as needed. Located right next to the kitchen, I was able to remain involved with the happenings of the house throughout the bustle. Two large bookshelves sat behind me. In front of me was the family room television

that we typically kept on, muted with subtitles, so we could see the ongoing updates regarding the dual pandemics: COVID 19 and the racialized uprising.

Jean and I worked in the same department, so I met her during my pre-pandemic interview process. I vividly remember connecting with her during my research talk and knew I wanted to work with her. Not long after my hire, I received a note that included this excerpt: "I wanted to reach out and offer my ear and availability for any question you might have as you move to this little corner of the country." Jean continued, "I'd like to invite you and whoever is in your family over to my deck for a physically distant, but in person gab!" She later concluded, "this time of COVID must be an especially challenging time to move—so how I help out might look different than it would otherwise, but I wanted to let you know that I am here." We would have lovely conversations over email and I would see her on a fairly regular basis at department meetings and sub-committee work sessions, often hanging out afterwards online to touch base both professionally and personally. When I found out she was running the writing group, needless to say, I was thrilled!

Melinda's Story

I began my career teaching in higher education at the age of 63, after teaching in Texas in both preschool and elementary education for over 30 years. At the time of our academic writing group, I was in my second year at the university: I served first as a lecturer, and then was rehired as an assistant professor the next year.

As a non-traditional graduate student in Texas, I sought out every writing support available, attending all-day Saturday writing sessions at the college and going to weekend overnight dissertation bootcamps. At that time, I became a well-known fixture in the college's computer lab on Saturdays. I always chose the same computer in the corner, where the windows looked on a view of the parking lot where pine trees loomed. When I first arrived as a lecturer, I would have jumped at the chance for another writing group, but alas, I taught a class when Jean met face-to-face with other faculty to write. Therefore, when Jean sent out the email invitation in summer 2020, I did not have to think twice.

The view outside my window in rural New England was breathtaking during all four seasons. My office faced the road and commanded a view of the front yard, complete with deer, dozens of wild turkeys, robins, squirrels, and chipmunks. I intentionally reflected on my Zoom background and loved the bookcases full of books that I often saw in my colleagues' backgrounds. Consequently, I arranged a similar scene of overflowing bookshelves.

My memories of Jean went back to before the pandemic. My office was adjacent to Jean's office. Before the lockdown, I remember Jean occasionally working in her office and she always left the door wide open to our suite so students might be welcomed in. Jean's father had been a pediatrician, and I remember taking my daughter to see him when she had strep throat during a summer visit. My older sister knew Jean's parents professionally, and my younger brother attended high school with Jean. When I first met Jean, I mentioned these hometown connections, and she was very kind about acknowledging that we were from the same town.

Jean's Story

I was a 56-year-old white woman who taught in the Special Education and Teacher Education programs at University of Southern Maine since 2002. Prior to this I was a special education teacher and research associate for inclusive practices. One of my areas of interest was fostering growth and development of junior faculty in the areas of scholarship, teaching, and service.

On the personal side, I was divorced in 2004 and have children who are now adults. Early in my time at USM, and in the lives of my children, having space and time away from home to write was important. The (previous) monthly writing group was critical to structuring this and I often used June to write while my kids were still in school but I was off contract for the university. Another strategy that worked for me was to register my children for summer camps or experiences, usually a week-long art or theater class, and I would set myself up at the library, overlooking the water where I would write from nine to three. It seemed that time, space, collaboration, and focus were essential to my writing life.

I lived in a small house in a small town in New England. My desk was at the end of a hallway in a niche that had windows on three sides of the desk and a bookcase I had tucked into the space. I looked out onto my yard that was ringed with old trees (maple, hickory, pine, and oak) and barely managed shrubs (honeysuckle, hydrangea, rhododendron, and lilac). Sitting at my desk, I could watch birds (cardinals, goldfinch, chickadees, and robins) come and go across the yard and mark the change of the seasons. I could see through the trees to the Saco River in the winter, spring brought the lilac and rhododendron into bloom, summer all was green, and the fall colors were lively.

Our Writing Group

Our first summer months together as a virtual writing group involved weekly meetings on Zoom. We would log in from the link that Jean had shared. Jean was almost always there first, waiting for us, welcoming us. Each of us would enter, arriving in our own box on the screen. As we each entered the Zoom meeting space, light conversation about life and work took place before we committed to a discussion of our writing goals for the day.

Jean would guide this transition by asking us to share what we intended to work on that day. There were also opportunities to ask questions. Jean or others might offer advice or information about the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or tenure review process. Jean was generous. For example, she would send us an example of an IRB form she had completed or a copy of her dossier as a model. We could work on anything we needed to during the independent work time. The entire process was about freedom and support, and it was interesting to learn about peer scholarship projects. After each person shared, we would log off for the next one to two hours to write, research, read, edit, or plan our individual projects. About 15 minutes before the end of our work session, we would again log in and report back to the group. Along the way we also shared drafts of our work, gave and received feedback, and discussed the peer review process each of us would move through that year.

Although we spent a good deal of time talking about our scholarly writing and tenure, sometimes the conversation led to the pandemic, family, food, pets, housing, and health issues. We discussed living through a pandemic, when each of us might be eligible to receive a vaccination, and what was happening in our states and cities. We discussed challenges related to supporting students through these difficult circumstances, lengthy publication timelines, and budget woes in our public university. We also celebrated one another's successes, such as publications and conference presentations.

Week after week, we entered the Zoom space and Jean was there, ready to greet us. As we logged into Zoom, Jean was sitting at her desk in her home, a staircase visible behind her. She described in her own writing that a window over her desk looked out into her yard. She was our North Star, our weekly touchpoint. Her steady and reassuring presence made this faculty work and made life feel possible.

Jean modeled extraordinary patience and presence; she possessed and modeled excellent listening skills. Deeper understanding of Jean's skill as an effective facilitator and mentor developed during our weekly writing group meetings throughout the next year. Meeting with Jean and peers was a special time. This space was full of trust. At one time or another, someone would express, "What is discussed here, stays here." Jean invested time in relating to each one of us personally. Jean modeled vulnerability. She joked. She laughed. She was honest about the job and provided a listening ear as well as support and feedback when needed. She was, quite simply, down-to-earth and real.

Narrative Writing

In July of 2021, Jean introduced the idea of conducting narrative inquiry around our writing group. Jean wrote:

Hi Folks,

Here is an "invitation" to participate—and/or a way for me to frame our writing group in the literature on narrative inquiry. Look it over and send or give me feedback at our meeting next week.

Also—be sure to keep in mind that your level of participation in the writing group over the last year should not be a consideration as to whether or not you want to contribute to this project—stories of how hard it is to write, juggle life, and manage all the other responsibilities that we have in this time of COVID are exactly what we want to document.

Cheers!
Jean

Although a bit hesitant because of time constraints, health, and COVID-19 worries, we agreed to work with Jean on this interesting idea. Jean asked each member to create a character sketch,

a Zoom context, and a chronology of their writing work from the beginning of the pandemic up to July 21, 2021, approximately a year. Therefore, in addition to our own scholarship, we joined Jean in working together on a narrative inquiry project. Each week when we met, we shared a bit more of our lives, our Zoom contexts, and/or our chronology of academic writing during the pandemic.

Trust grew and our weekly writing group became a place to be oneself, admit fatigue, mindfully listen, and experience connection. We were beginning to understand the complexities of one another's lives: Emily's challenges with a family health situation, Larissa's full family life and housing search from afar, Nicole's settling into a new home and community, and Melinda's ongoing home search in the area while living at a family's home. And Jean had serious health challenges that became clearer to us over time.

Journaling during our time together, Jean wrote,

In 2015, I was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer and have been going through a wide variety of treatments ever since. Structuring my writing is more challenging these days as my focus and stamina vary considerably. I have been writing more about my own experience in recent years as opposed to the creation of manuscripts based on external samples, hypotheses, and analysis, or what Boyer (1996) might call the scholarship of discovery.

Interestingly, we knew or suspected that Jean was battling cancer at the beginning of our writing group. However, we did not understand the full scope until much later in our year together. Jean rarely talked about her health condition with the group and maintained a professional facilitator role. From time-to-time, she would share with us a needed medical trip or note her hope to be included in an experimental treatment. She periodically noted to one or more of us in emails that she wasn't feeling well that week or that her father was taking her to a nearby city for treatment. At one particular meeting, it was only Nicole, Jean, and another one of the semi-regular group members. Jean was visibly upset, having just found out she would no longer be able to swim. The members present held space for her.

Because Jean appeared so vital, we often forgot that she had terminal cancer. However, Jean was very open and honest about her illness. In the latter months of our writing group, she was excited about the prospect of participating in a special trial, and traveled down to a medical facility every weekend for the treatments while continuing to meet with us as often as possible. Then, we received another email:

Hi all,

I'm not able to join the writing group today. My procedure last Friday was more invasive than I expect [*sic*] and I'm still recovering.

I hope I get to see you next week!

Jean

Jean's last communication with Larissa was difficult. Jean did not show up to another meeting and we were all worried. Larissa texted Jean after the group touched base:

Larissa: Hi, Jean! We missed you today! How are you doing?

Jean: Oh dear, what a week it's been. ER...ambulance. And waiting for doctors to decide if they can fix my [body part]. I hope to be home by the end of the week. Sorry for not communicating but thanks for reaching out. ❤️

Larissa: Oh, no! I am sorry that you have been going through it. Let me know if you need anything or would like someone to just sit with you. ❤️

Jean: Thank you. 🙏

We made a plan to meet again in two weeks, but our meeting never came. Neither did the two after that. We reconvened briefly at the start of the new fall school year, mostly wondering how to proceed and if anyone had heard from Jean. Then, we received another email:

Dear friends and colleagues,

I have taken a turn in my disease and have therefore decided to take the fall semester off. I will hope to join you on future Tuesday afternoons but go ahead without me.

I will be in touch.

Love
Jean

A few days later, we received word that Jean had passed away. Our time together in Jean's Space had come to an abrupt end.

Our Reflections on Our Loss

There are times in our lives when a special person enters our sphere, even for a short time, and touches us deeply and in surprising ways. Jean had spirit, tenacity, and courage. She supported us as junior academic writers during a pandemic and her illness, always providing plenty of positivity, understanding, and patience, and then she was gone. Several of us attended Jean's funeral, which was held in her backyard. Jean's view for those many, many Zoom meetings faced the front yard, the road, and the river beyond. For Jean's funeral service, in her beautiful backyard, Jean's view was the tall pine trees leading into the forest behind her house, that she so lovingly described in her writings for our group project.

Life After Jean

Beginning relationships over an online platform is odd, but even odder is developing those relationships and creating true bonds. During this time in our writing group, we not only formed relationships and created bonds, we survived and thrived during a worldwide crisis.

We four made the choice to continue writing together after Jean's death, primarily to tell this story. We have met regularly as a group for the past year to take an idea that she had introduced to us—writing a narrative about our writing group—and bring it into form. It has been a cathartic process along the way and an opportunity to create meaning together. We also felt that it might encourage others, especially those new to academia, to experience the power of writing together, navigating the ivory tower together, and supporting each other through hard times. We think there is a part of all of us that genuinely just liked seeing each other regularly, especially after sharing loss. Jean's legacy continues and the space she created still remains safe for us and, while she is gone, what she cultivated within our group lives on.

References

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